



Comment And Opinion

Race, the Other and Resident Evil

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The article analyses the characterisation of two female action heroes in *Resident Evil* (Paul W. S. Anderson, 2002) to argue that, through generic conventions and standardisation, regressive and essentialist notions of race are upheld and thinly veiled via the concept of the liberated progressive woman in film. References are made to earlier horror cinema to argue that this is a longstanding practice that may only be unpacked through a consciousness to the mechanisms of mainstream cinema. The Other is also briefly discussed to argue that representations of non-White races are marked as that which should be expelled, paralleling or even subsuming the presence of monsters and zombies.

Race has long been a contentious topic in relation to the horror film. We've all heard of the moniker 'the Black guy gets it first', but, of course, non-White characters had to actually exist in the horror film before they were even able to be killed off first. During the early twentieth century horror cycle, including classics such as Tod Browning's *Dracula* (1931) and James Whale's *Frankenstein* (1931), the most notable victims were screaming White women.

This leads to the question, how, if at all, are non-Whites represented in horror cinema? To answer this we must consider the foundation of almost all horror films: there is a structure that must be upheld (this could be a town, a country, a family, a relationship); and there is a presence that threatens to destroy it. In classic horror cinema this presence came in the guise of the vampire, the zombie, the mummy, the werewolf, the giant ape, to name just a few. These monsters are always signified as the 'other' of the norm that must be upheld, in other words they are that which is different from 'us', that which is not 'us' and consequently that which must be expelled for society to continue in the desired way. Unlike contemporary horror films that often see monsters represented as not only human but also potentially living just down the road, classic monsters are distinctively non-human (although they do work to blur the boundaries between human and non-human) and come from far off lands (in relation to the American and British audiences these films were intended for): the Carpathian Mountains, castles in Germany, the deserts of Egypt, an unexplored island. Consider the actors who play the monsters in Tod Browning's *Dracula* and James Whale's *Frankenstein*: Bela Lugosi and Boris Karloff. Even their names signify them as non-American. As a result, some studies of classic horror cinema have considered these films to express an anxiety of other races and cultures and their potential to invade American society and corrupt their women and children.¹

Consider *King Kong* (Merian C Cooper and Ernest B Schoedsack, 1933) for example: When *King Kong* was released, organisations such as the Ku Klux Klan were in decline; however, the emancipation proclamation had only been enforced less than seventy years before and institutionalised racism continued with force. Stereotypical images of African Americans were prolific in the media, and for many decades Black characters in films were only ever minor or providing comic relief, nearly always identifiable as their stock stereotypes: the hyper-sexual buck, the fat mammy, the lazy and carefree sambo, the magical negro.² These representations propelled the myth that African Americans were lazy, stupid, dishonest, and something to be feared and expelled.

In recognising these negative perceptions of non-Whites, we can see a number of binaries that form, and actually generate each other. If an African, or African American is sexually lascivious, a White is sexually demure. If the former is overly passionate the latter is blessed by reason. If the former is wild the latter is impeccably cultured. And if the former seeks to strip White women of their virtue the latter seeks to uphold and protect it. These binaries are quick, easy ways to tell a complicated story in a short space of time. But the price to pay for speed and simplicity is the emergence and/or upholding

of reductive, essentialist, racist, and sexist stereotypes.³

The main focus of this comment piece will be *Resident Evil*, a horror action thriller released in 2002, directed by Paul W. S. Anderson and based on the popular videogame of the same name. I chose this film because it could quite easily be read as a representation of strong women, however I would suggest that these values are constantly and consistently undermined by reductive notions of race. As Stephen Harper, writing for *Jumpcut* argues; 'despite containing some feminist and other progressive representational strategies [*Resident Evil* films] deploy stereotypes of gender, race and sexuality.'⁴ Further, this comes as a result of standardisation, which is the process of making something palatable for as many people as possible, often through stereotypes.⁵ Although it could be considered as rather sneaky, it is not an uncommon practice to disguise regressive and harmful stereotypes with potentially liberating, progressive stereotypes.

The two most interesting characters, in regards to race and gender relations, are Alice and Rain, played by Milla Jovovich and Michelle Rodriguez respectively. Unsurprisingly, the marketing campaign behind the film capitalised on the image of these two women. Frequently they are seen together, with Milla Jovovich locking eyes with the camera and Michelle Rodriguez looking off to the right. Whereas Rodriguez has an aggressive stance, her shoulder creating a barrier between herself and viewer, Jovovich holds her shoulders back with her entire torso open to attack – in spite of the absolutely massive gun she is brandishing. Sometimes, one of the film's taglines, 'Evil Never Dies' runs underneath this image. Although we can assume this is referring to the zombies they will inevitably encounter, there is no direct reference to the film's content, leaving us to ponder on the possible connection between 'evil' and the overtly female presence. Further, the depiction of these two women together is interesting in regards to how race is used as a signifier for their respective personalities. As Harper points out, the image serves as a signifier for 'the film's hierarchical structuring of racial identity.'⁶ Before going into this, a brief synopsis is in order.

Resident Evil is a zombie movie set in 'The Hive', which is a beehive shaped office and research facility located deep beneath the surface of Raccoon city. The Hive is owned by the Umbrella Corporation, a faceless bio-engineering conglomerate. One of the research projects for this company involves genetic engineering for which a virus is produced. This particular virus causes human tissue to become reanimated after death, in other words, it makes zombies. The virus is released at the very start of the film, triggering the Hive to activate its intelligence defence networks. In order to inhibit the release of the virus onto the surface of the city, the Hive closes its doors, releases nerve gas and floods its offices and laboratories. The main action begins once everyone who was working underground has died and external soldiers enter the site to investigate what has transpired. They find Alice in the mansion above the Hive.

Alice is one of the security team for the Hive, who is suffering from short term memory loss as one of the Hive's security defences. As mentioned above, she is played by Ukrainian-born Milla Jovovich who is probably best known for her role in Luc Besson's *The Fifth Element* (1997), in which she plays Leeloo, a humanoid. In both these roles Jovovich's character is defined by an absent past; one is inhibited by a loss of memory (Alice) and the other by a language barrier (Leeloo). Indeed, Leeloo is created by scientists, as the only part of her recovered was a hand holding a briefcase; in essence, Leeloo is a clone born by man who consider they have created the 'perfect woman'. In both films, these characters' stories are told by their body. In both *The Fifth Element* and *Resident Evil*, Jovovich's body is a character in itself; dressed in tight and revealing clothes, her body's clean hard lines and stark White skin, often enhanced with lighting, is striking to behold. Her bodycage in *The Fifth Element*, designed by John Paul Gaultier, speaks to her restrictions laid out by men (she is their creation after all). In *Resident Evil*, her strange and skimpy red dress (the purpose of which is never explained, but seems wholly inappropriate attire in which to be investigating an underground facility whose defence

systems have been activated) is laid out for her when she emerges from the bathroom, bewildered as to where she is. Perhaps she laid it out for herself before her shower; however this would merely be conjecture. The underlying factor is that frequently Jovovich's characters have very little say in their physical existence. As a White woman, her body is objectified and acts as a representation for 'the' White woman. In both films mentioned here, her almost child-like, yet sexualised and fetishised, body is linked to virtue and innocence. This becomes all the more significant when she is contrasted with her non-White counterpart. For Alice to be White in *Resident Evil*, and to infer a meaning from this, it has to be read against non-Whiteness.

Alice's non-White counterpart is Rain. We end up knowing very little of who she actually is, contrasted to the 'titbits' of information we are given regarding Alice's love-life and political values. It is likely that too much character development would take up precious space needed for action sequences and pithy one-liners. As fun as these may be, unfortunately it does mean that regressive stereotypes are resorted to in order to create a recognisable character. By choosing Michelle Rodriguez, who is of Dominican Republic and Puerto Rican descent, this character has already been partially formed – she is frequently chosen to play the 'tough girl', see *Girlfight* (Karyn Kusama, 2000) and *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009). Immediately she is sexualised with her opening line ('blow me'). Later in the film, this is referred to again as she claims 'when I get outta here ... think I'm gonna get laid'. As Harper points out in his article, there are certainly notions of class entwined with notions of race and the binary of good/bad woman in this statement,⁷ particularly when juxtaposed with the intermittent flashbacks of Alice's own sexual encounters – slow motion shots of her and her security partner rolling around, sharing a passionate embrace in white sheets on a magnificent and luxurious four-poster bed.

Rain's physicality is also highlighted early on in the film, as she comfortably climbs amongst pipes and wires to fix an electrical fault in a shuttle they are using as transportation. While climbing amongst these metal limbs, an industrialised version of a forest, she holds her torch in her mouth, forcing her to curl her lips and bare her teeth. When compared with our first encounter with Alice's physicality (lying in a half unconscious and helpless state, naked on the bathroom floor), it is clear that whereas Alice is presented as passive and submissive, Rain is active to the point of being aggressive. She is the human version of the sexualised animalistic counter-part of the good White female that dates back to Schoedsack and Cooper's *King Kong*. In short, her race is used as shorthand for certain characteristics that uphold harmful, regressive, racist assumptions of non-White cultures, which is enhanced in *Resident Evil* by Milla Jovovich's Whiteness. This is evident even down to their eyes – frequently there are shots of both actresses staring off-screen, each striking in their own, and highly opposite, way. Whereas Alice's big wide blue eyes suggest an openness, an innocence, and a questioning, Rain's heavy lidded, dark brown glare, rolled up to reveal a large amount of white, is that of a sexualised predator. Even as her representation as a 'strong woman' is undermined by its relation to regressive representations of her race, it is further neutralised by fetishisation.

As the film progresses, Alice and Rain's characters begin to change. As a result of injuries, Rain becomes physically inhibited, having to be helped along by others until she is ultimately required to be sacrificed as the 'Red Queen' (the intelligent defence system of the Hive) declares her a risk to humanity. Alternatively, Alice slowly regains her memory culminating in a fantastic fighting sequence between her and a number of zombified Dobermans. (Fighting styles also point to differences between Alice and Rain: whereas Rain depends on her gun and forward aggression, Alice's stylised and choreographed fighting style suggests rationality, class and intellectualism). It appears as a perfectly synchronised sliding scale: as Rain loses her active aggressive autonomy, Alice gains it in equal measure. Thus, can we not argue that both races are treated and represented in a similar fashion? Well, no, for a number of reasons. First, Alice's passive child-like nature at the beginning of the film is signified by her clean, unblemished, naked body and innocent ignorance of the dangers and evils around her. Rain's descent into a submissive state is coupled with disease as her body continues to deteriorate and she looks

more and more sickly. Rain's initial aggression is the one and only characterisation we have to go on in order to understand her narrative trajectory; Alice's aggression is justified as she couples it with reason and rationality – she is the only one able to keep calm enough to figure a way out – and a maternal streak. Even as she fights her way through zombies, dogs and capitalist giants, she displays a tremendous amount of care for those around her, (who she has only known for a few hours) and takes care of them if and when they become injured. Particularly her relationship with Rain, which develops at an incredible rate from barely looking at each other to Alice willing to risk her life for her, these character traits temper her aggression and provide an acceptable reason for it. The message is clear – whereas aggression is an essential trait for Rain, which is entwined with the whole of her character that is non-White, it is merely an adaptive measure for Alice, rather than an inherent quality of her nature.

Of course, in spite of all of the above, we cannot forget that this film ends with one woman, Alice, standing and prepared to take on a post-apocalyptic world. Only a mere few decades ago this would have been unheard of in cinema. Indeed, in 1979 when the makers of *Alien*, (Ridley Scott) decided to make the final survivor a woman, it was a conscious decision – undoubtedly influenced by the contemporary wave of feminism – to make the film a little different and to create an alternative dynamic and, of course, appeal to audiences who were open to strong leading female characters (this was the era of *Charlie's Angels* and *The Bionic Woman* – in spite of the many feminist critiques that can and have been made of these series, the presence of women in lead roles on television was significant nonetheless). The survivor of *Alien* can likewise be criticised for her sexualisation (the infamous vest and knickers scene towards the end of the film has been said to undermine everything she has done before, although one film scholar, Cynthia Freeland, argues that her near naked stance is not especially marked by femininity⁸) and for her relationship with Jonesy the cat creating a maternal motivation for her behaviour. In spite of this, I would suggest that without Ripley, we would not have had the 'Final Girl'⁹ seen in many horror films throughout the 1980s, there would be no *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and there would have been no Alice and Rain in *Resident Evil*. Whether this is a good or a bad thing is entirely subjective, I'll leave that up to you. What is predominantly problematic however is the tendency for gender theories, and feminist theories (particularly those that emerged in the 1970s) to ignore differences other than man/woman. 'Woman' can too easily be seen as universal and this has often meant White, heterosexual and middle class. Although *Resident Evil* is drawing on the potential for fighting, surviving women to create a progressive and liberating narrative, I would suggest that this is merely a thin and poorly conceived veil that attempts to disguise the use of harmful gender and racial stereotypes for the purpose of pleasing the masses.

The danger of films such as *Resident Evil* is that they are often a lot of fun – their action sequences and quick dialogue tend to propel you forward, thinking of nothing but suspension and climaxes. Although there may be many that scoff at my suggestion that such a film presents a 'danger' of any kind, without consciousness of mechanisms put in place to provide a narrative quickly and easily, regressive and reductive stereotypes will continue to proliferate both consciously and in the unconscious. Further, it doesn't have to be like this. A more recent release, *District 9* (Neill Blomkamp, 2009), represents the Other very markedly as a non-White race, and produces them as monstrous, revolting and very difficult to identify with. However, throughout the process of the narrative, character development and the introduction of human traits, this Other becomes subsumed, enveloped and accepted by the self. Films can explore, critique and question these boundaries, opening up different ways to theorise the self and the other, or even question the necessity for this theorisation.

One way films may attempt to transgress binaries such as self/other, man/woman, White/non-White is to flip them on their head. This can be seen nowhere more clearly than in *Dr Black and Mr White* aka *Dr Black and Mr Hyde*, released in 1976 and directed by William Crain. It was part of the Blaxploitation cycle of films prolific at this particular time and attempted to unpack racist assumptions inherent in Robert

Louis Stevenson's original tale by making the Doctor a good-hearted Black man working tirelessly to help members of an under-privileged and segregated Black community, and consequently presenting his aggressive counter-part as White. Film scholar Harry M. Benshoff argues that Blaxploitation horror films' narrative structure and racial identities produce a potential critique of social and generic racism, as well as significantly changing how the horror film normally represents normality and monstrosity.¹⁰ However, during a recent screening of this film at the University of Manchester as part of the Race-Relations Resource Centre cinema series, discussions with the fantastic students who attended led me to conclude that all this film has done is to reverse a damaging binary without fully interrogating it. Without interrogation, reductive stereotypes will remain. This is all *Resident Evil* has done – placed a woman into what many before the 1970s would have considered a male role and attempted to create a place of aggression for Alice and passivity for Rain.

I would go so far as to suggest that the Other represented as horrific in *Resident Evil* is not the zombie, it is Rain herself. Zombies merely provide a convenient sub-story to the relationship that develops between Alice and Rain. One of the key concepts of the Other is that it must be continuously expelled in order to regain equilibrium. Hence Kong, Dracula, Frankenstein's monster, the mummy, giant ants and killer tomatoes are ultimately defeated. What Alice is able to do, and where Rain fails, is to take on certain qualities of the Other – action and aggression – without becoming lost to it. By contrast, as Rain dies and becomes a zombie, she is merely an intensified version of what she already was – her head tilt and bared teeth recall facial expressions seen earlier in the film. Because of her non-White status in this film, Rain cannot expel the Other; she can only herself be expelled.

End notes

¹ See for example: Berenstein, Rhona J. *Attack of the Leading Ladies: Gender, Sexuality, and Spectatorship in Classic Horror Cinema*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996.; Pirie, David. *A Heritage of Horror: the English Gothic Cinema, 1946 – 1972*. London: Gordon Fraser Gallery Ltd, 1973.; Grant, Barry Keith., ed. *Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film*. London: Scarecrow, 1984.; Tudor, Andrew. *Monsters and Mad Scientists: A Cultural History of the Horror Movie*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1989.; Jancovich, Mark. *Rational Fears: American Horror in the 1950s*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996.; Hutchings, Peter. *The Horror Film*. Harlow: Longman, 2004.; Prince, Stephen., ed. *The Horror Film*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004.; Worland, Rick. *The Horror Film: An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2007.; Silver, Alain. and Ursini, James., eds. *The Horror Film Reader*. New York: Limelight editions, 2000.; Hutchings, Peter. *Hammer and Beyond: The British Horror Film*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993.; Humphries, Reynold. *The American Horror Film: An Introduction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002.; Benshoff, Harry. M. *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997.; Jancovich, Mark., ed. *Horror: The Film Reader*. London: Routledge, 2002.

² See for example Leab, Daniel. J. *From Sambo to Superspade: The Black Experience in Motion Pictures*. London: Secker and Warburg, 1975.; Pines, Jim. *Blacks in Films: A Survey of Racial Themes and Images in the American Film*. London: Studio Vista, 1975.

³ See Turner, Graeme. *Film as Social Practice*. 3rd ed. London: Routledge, 1999, pp.77 – 109, Film Narrative.

⁴ Harper, Stephen "I could kill you, you bitch." Race, gender and sexuality in *Resident Evil* and *Resident Evil 2: Apocalypse*. *Jump Cut. A Review of Contemporary Media*. 49, 2007. [Online]. (Retrieved August 11, 2012). (Url, <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc49.2007/HarperResEvil/index.html>).

⁵ See Adorno, Theodor. *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*. London: , 1991.

⁶ Harper, Stephen (ref. 4).

⁷ Harper, Stephen (ref. 4).

⁸ See Freeland, Cynthia. *The Naked and the Undead*. Oxford: Westview, 2000, pp. 64-66.

⁹ See Clover, Carol. *Men Women and Chainsaws: Gender and the Horror Film*. London: British Film Institute, 1992.

¹⁰ Benshoff, Harry. M. Blaxploitation Horror Films: Generic Reappropriation or Reinscription? *Cinema Journal*, 39(2), 2000, pp. 31-50.

Britishness in Bermondsey: Being and Belonging

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The research was conducted in a secondary school in South East London with two classes of students who completed GCSE Art coursework on Britishness. The students completed questionnaires midway and at the end of the project. I also conducted one hour interviews with two pairs of students.

Here I will outline my specific findings and analyse these findings in order to achieve an understanding of the definitions and discourses of Britishness according to two GCSE students who have studied this identity issue in extensive detail. One of the students in this interview was male, the other female and they were different cultural backgrounds. The paired interview allowed the students to interact with one another, converse with one another and share their ideas with me in a relaxed and open research setting. I was able to learn about their definitions of and discourses on Britishness.

THE RESEARCH:

My interest in exploring the meanings and definitions of Britishness stemmed from my own experiences: I am – in no particular order - British, of Pakistani descent, Muslim, and from Lancashire but living in London. The meaning of Britishness has evolved throughout my life. I was born in the late seventies, and now more than thirty years on, Britishness has been adapted, amended and articulated in so many exciting new ways. And this is what I aimed to learn: what has Britishness now become – specifically to these Bermondsey students?

My keenness in this research was also sparked by the contemporary concern on issues of identity. It was talk from previous and current government figureheads that made me want to affirm or negate their standpoints and positions; the government's concerns with 'radicalisation' of young Muslim males, and the educational failure of the White working-class males, were two significant concerns. The Labour government – towards the end of its reign – was promoting the teaching and learning of Britishness in schools. David Cameron – early on in the coalition government's rule – attacked multiculturalism.

I aimed to see the discussing, debating and defining of this difficult concept of Britishness in action, in practice and in the classroom itself. For this is what the government was proposing – that Britishness be taught in school. I wanted to steer away from it being almost side-lined in extra-curricular subjects. I wanted the topic to have significance by giving the students an opportunity to treat this discourse on Britishness seriously, and the perfect place seemed to be through the curriculum in a classroom setting. Further the fact that it was a GCSE Art module gave the subject more seriousness. This would be a valid and valuable avenue to study and reflect on Britishness in a personal and meaningful, yet structured and specific way. In this way the students would be given time to work on their ideas of Britishness for weeks rather than simply discussing it in a one hour interview. In addition to learning about their definitions and discourses of Britishness, I also wanted to see how the students and teachers regarded the actual process of studying Britishness. Moreover, by using data from a GCSE Art project over a longer sustained period of time, I would be able to obtain deeper and more reflective responses from the students. The Head of Art wanted to write a module which allowed her Art students to explore Britishness. I was keen to investigate how it felt for these students and their respective teachers to study Britishness.

BRITAIN: DO YOU BELONG?

ELLIE: I don't think there is like an obvious concept of being British....maybe not anymore...I think...It's more about London which is very multicultural. It's not what it is to be British... Everyone is unique in London.

The female student importantly articulates that identity is not fixed, but changes as generations come and go. She recognises that multiculturalism has added another dimension to the definition of Britishness, highlighting the 'unique' nature of our demographics. Her focus on the city of London – belonging to a part of London is key to her to identity, and from what she tells me it is more important than Britishness itself. The male student then raises the point that there are differences, and that being British isn't a straightforward acquisition for those who migrate to the UK. For him there is a respect for freedom of choice. Though he mentions his Polish neighbours not wishing to belong to British society, at the same time he recognises that the attitudes of people can change, and often do change. Again this highlights the evolving nature of identity as well as how the discourse and discussion on identity is ever developing too. Is it Britain or is it Poland – where do they belong? The answer for this student seems to be that the neighbours want to be Polish.

CHRIS: Yeah, I'm thinking about some new people in my area. They are from Poland, I think, and they can't speak that much English properly. But I think that...they were talking to my neighbours and she said that they don't want to be part of this society. She doesn't feel part of society yet, but I don't know about now...Probably changed now.

Notions of belonging, home and national identity affiliations are subject to change in our globalised world. And no doubt the Polish neighbours the male student uses to illustrate his example will have adapted and evolved in terms of identity over the last five years. The male student, like the female student earlier, recognises that identity is not fixed in time, but is subject to change.

LONDON: GLOSSY AND GRITTY

Ellie relates to us how the glossy façade of London that the tourists see on their visits to the capital is very different to the reality of the city. The 'nice and perfect' elements of London are not all there is: there is 'so much more than that':

ELLIE: ...last Christmas I did my work experience up in London. And when I started getting the bus back, and there were like loads and loads of tourists around taking photos, cos all the Christmas lights were up... And I got the impression that this is what they saw London as...I think I was in Regent Street, while I was there, I felt out of place, and then I thought this is London, this is Britain, this is what I am...and this is what they think London's about, but it's not. It's so much more than that. Tourists think it's all nice and perfect, but it's not.

The student at a very young age is aware of the stark differences between the rich and the poor parts of London. Regent Street is a world away from Bermondsey, though both belong to London. And the student is obviously moved by the fact that for many Londoners (that is many British people) poverty is a problem. The language she uses 'struggle', 'poverty' and 'in need' highlight the grim aspects to life in the city:

ELLIE: Because like, well in Regent Street where I was, there had been so much money and effort put into making it look so lovely and everyone was friendly in the shops and that...like Christmas spirit or whatever. But there are so many people that are in need...and poverty in London, and I don't think a lot of people know about that...they think we are really rich and posh and formal, but there are a lot of people who struggle in London...

CHRIS: It's like the same thing with us though, if we haven't visited a country we judge a country before we go and there and actually see....someone could say that country is poor and run-down or something but we haven't seen everything, you just have seen what you seen on the media, that representation of the country, that's all we see. But there could be good parts to the country. Tourists

who come here won't think there's all gun crime and that because tourists who come here go up London to Oxford Street, Tower Bridge and that...they see the nice parts of London.

ELLIE: Peckham, Brixton...

The male student then is able to also recognise that media representations give people a chance to pre-judge a place, a nation and their people. Thus for him, although the tourism of London revolves around Oxford Street and Tower Bridge and such places both pleasing to the eye and the mind, a principal association with the reality of living in London is 'gun crime'. Moreover, for this student – and many others living in London – there is a stark contrast between areas such as 'Peckham' and 'Brixton' in comparison with central London itself in all its glossy glory. Britishness will surely have different meanings depending on where your actual abode is, and thus what your lived experience of Britain and social identity is within that specific geographical boundary. London, the students are telling me, is all about the glossy versus the gritty. The female student echoes the concerns of her male peer, and further she refers to governmental policies neglecting inner city areas and their residents, and gives her perception that the money goes into areas of London which are already affluent. It must not be ignored that these students have major concerns about issues which affect young Londoners: gun crime, gang culture and redistribution of wealth. These are serious plights that these students have had a significant experience in what they see happening in their immediacy and in their reality.

There is real socio-political awareness in the discourse of these students – as Londoners they see beyond what they believe is glossiness sold to tourists. They feel proud of the city, they feel part of the city – but they feel separate from it at the same time regardless of 'race'. This seems a class issue: a White female student and a male student with dual heritage do not refer to issues of 'race', but instead class differences dominate their discussion on the meaning of Britishness. For example the divided nature of the city of London beyond geographical boundaries but into class boundaries is an issue they raise. Areas such as Peckham and Brixton are very different to Regent Street, Oxford Street and Tower Bridge – and to the students these social class differences are visible, real and lived. Geographical differences within London figure in their ideas on Britishness. Being British then is about local identity as well as national identity. Definitions of Britishness are determined then not just by one's ethnic or religious background, but also by one's social class status or position. These students feel neglected by powerful institutions such as polity – they feel that money and efforts to improve their locality are not being put into where they belong, for instance Bermondsey or Peckham.

FAMILY, HOME AND BELONGING

ELLIE: I don't know because all my family are in Beckenham, so when I'm there I do feel I'm at home, because I can go 'round to my nans or my aunts...

Family is a factor that heavily influences Ellie's ideas on home and belonging. Discussion about national identity also focuses our understanding on the changing nature of home for the individual, as well as the changing landscape of Britain generally. One student may have multiple affiliations – the places from whence grandparents came (for example many of the White students claim Irish descent), the places dear to the hearts of their parents, and then the places they themselves have been born, lived in and grown up in.

ELLIE: ...because Beckenham, maybe because it is further from central London, it's not so multi-cultural, and people are more like all the same. Whereas in New Cross, it's so many different cultures, there's so many different people from like all over the world, so many different clothes, they speak different languages, they eat different foods. I just think our people are more accepting of something that they don't think is normal.

Ellie recognises that there is an impact of multiculturalism on notions of national identity. She is able

to contrast the ideas about social identity out in those suburbs of Kent with her experience of residing in New Cross in South East London. The multiple languages, cultures, peoples and foods of New Cross and other vibrant 'ethnic' areas of London lend a new angle to the Britishness question. As she tells us 'people are more accepting of' what they think of as not 'normal', that is the other. Thus in some parts of inner and outer London where there is a multicultural population Britishness of a multicultural ilk seems more readily accepted, whilst in the mono-cultural suburbs of Kent, for example, it seems that the 'other' – languages, cultures, people and food – are not so 'normal', not so acceptable and not so British. In Kent, she tell us Britishness conforms to a 'stereotypes...of like...living in a three-bedroom semi-detached house, like happy families, sit down and eat dinner together...'.

'There's different sides to Britishness', she goes on to tell me. Thus Britishness is not fixed or rigid – but the notion is flexible and open to interpretation:

SH: And in New Cross? What does Britishness mean to people in New Cross?

ELLIE: I think it's too far spread to connect it together ...because to say this is Britishness, because everyone has such different opinions because everyone is so different...

And then when she draws a comparison with New Cross, her ideas once again point to difference – 'everyone has different opinions' and 'everyone is so different'- and so in her eyes these differences lead to difficulties in forming a stable and solid idea on what Britishness means to the people who reside in areas such as New Cross. She regards the residents of places such as Beckenham, with different demographics, as having more homogeneity in their views on the meaning and definition of Britishness.

Whereas the female student deemed her 'ethnicity' as White 'British', the male student hailed from a dual heritage background; and he acknowledges that he feels closest to his maternal side of the family who mainly live in Jamaica and the United States and who he visits regularly, and whilst out there he feels like he is an ambassador for Britain. The male student has loyalties with both Britain and Jamaica. It is interesting that a change of place can bring out different feelings regarding national identity: when in Jamaica, the male student may feel much more of an affiliation with the Jamaican identity, yet at the same time when in Jamaica he is being reminded in his encounters with others of his British-ness. Moreover, not only do the Jamaicans he encounters when on holiday there remind him of his British identity, but he, himself, 'feels' British. In this way we can see the complexity of the intertwining of national and cultural identity. In Jamaica when Chris is with family and friends curious about London or Britain, then his sense of British identity is asserted and emphasised. It is this process of assertion and emphasis on his Britishness – both national and cultural identity – that allows him to probably feel more British when abroad, than when he is in Britain itself:

SH: When you are here in London, do you feel Jamaican or British?

CHRIS: I feel British, but...yeah I feel more British really. But if I'm talking to someone, and they ask me where I'm from, I say: 'I'm half-English and half-Jamaican'.

Thus though being British may be his 'natural' primary identity when he is in London, he still refers to his Jamaican heritage when he is asked about his background. Thus we can see that the geographical setting will impact upon a sense of identity: where we are gives meaning to who we are. We see that family heavily influences a sense of national and cultural identity – for the male student informs us that even in London, he spends more time with his maternal side of the family who are Jamaican and so he 'feels' more Jamaican.

RACISM IN BERMONDSEY: A GRAIN OF TRUTH OR INGRAINED?

CHRIS: Yeah, 'cos most people have stereotypes about Bermondsey...like there's loads of chavs there...and there's gangs around there. That's how it is around there.

ELLIE: Especially since Big Brother¹ people think it's quite racist...

CHRIS: Yeah, like people from a posh part of London would say Bermondsey is not a nice area, that it's racist around here and there's all chavs and there's loads of gangs...

A de-construction of these stereotypes would be helpful in any teaching and learning on Britishness in schools for a concern about stereotypes feature heavily in the discourse of the students. The response the two students provide shows that they believe that there is a disturbingly negative stereotype about what Britishness means in Bermondsey. Even more disturbing is when the female student refers to a picture of Britishness in Bermondsey being 'racist', which the male student reiterates.

ELLIE: In a way, I can see where people get the stereotype from...but...what they see as a chav they might think they see in Bermondsey, but how can they say that person's a chav when they have never met that person or those kind of people...because people around here aren't...they are not horrible. Alright they might...noone's perfect, but people 'round here, if you don't like them, that's your opinion...but I don't think you can put them into one category...

There is a fierce loyalty to Bermondsey. Ellie has a keen awareness of the homogenous nature of stereotypes, for she tells 'I don't think you can put them into one category'. She tells us she understands why this stereotype might exist, but she doesn't agree it can be applied to all of Bermondsey – because it is in essence a stereotype. There may be a grain of truth to it – but it is not ingrained.

SH: Do you think it's a stereotype about Bermondsey then that it is racist, or do you think racism does exist in Bermondsey?

ELLIE: Yeah, there is racism in Bermondsey...

CHRIS: Yeah, there is...

The students relay their experiences of extreme right-wing politics:

CHRIS: Yeah...round Bermondsey every year, they have a NF march...a National Front march... they are racist people...and everyone who wasn't born here or who isn't British...they want them to go back where they came from or to get out of this country...because this country belongs to them...but at the end of the day, because Britishness has changed so much now and involves all these different cultures, if everyone left and went back to their country, this country would kinda fall...

ELLIE: Yeah...

The male student brings up the annual marches led by extreme right-wing factions held in Bermondsey. Throughout my years teaching in Bermondsey a number of students had mentioned this annual march by the BNP through Bermondsey; I remember that this was a frightening and disturbing feature of Bermondsey in particular for those students from a non-White background. Chris believes that Britain would 'fall' without these multicultural elements, and his female peer supports his view:

CHRIS: ...because most people who come to this country...they come here and they build it up, if everyone left, it would fall...

ELLIE: Yeah...they are a part of us...

CHRIS: Yeah, they are a part of our country...they helped build up the country...and they still don't belong...

There is an element of sadness and disbelief in his words: that these people from immigrant backgrounds have helped to build Britain, and yet 'they still don't belong'. There is a lot of confusion about these different far-right groups – I wonder if the term NF is still part of the semantic field of racism throughout Britain, or just restricted to South East London or even Bermondsey. Groups such as the BNP and the EDL are the contemporary counterparts of the once notorious NF, yet NF remains in the vocabulary of Bermondsey. This opens the question about whether it is crucial to discuss these groups in school so that students have an informed understanding of what they stand for and what they do. Some teachers may regard this as dangerous territory, and be reluctant to raise taboo and highly sensitive topics. Some teachers though may be willing to engage in debates about such controversial issues. I recall when it was around the time of the BNP march – the students would bring up the topic just generally in chit chat during or after lesson – and I didn't quite know how to deal with it myself – I wasn't sure how to respond. There was genuine concern or curiosity about this annual march, and even fear. The non-White students who raised this were afraid for their immediate safety as well as for the implications for their belonging to Bermondsey and Britain.

Ellie goes on to recall disturbing experiences in other areas of London where she doesn't feel safe or where she doesn't feel she belongs. Both students are very loyal to Bermondsey, and very aware of feeling like outsiders in neighbouring areas of London. Although both students recognise the ugly side of Bermondsey, that is the racist reputation, they still point out that they have had no trouble and that they feel safe in Bermondsey. That it seems is where they immediately belong. Their sense of national identity is dwarfed by their sense of local identity. Both students are remarkably honest in front of each other and in front of me in their discussion on identity. They are extremely frank and candid about their views on 'race', particularly as the 'interview' or 'discussion' or 'exchange' progressed, they seemed to feel more and more comfortable, relaxed and able to say whatever was on their mind in relation to this topic.

Conclusions:

Belonging to Britain can be deconstructed: belonging to London, or belonging more particularly to Bermondsey is key to their identity. It is more about the Bermondsey identity than British identity for these students. It is more about local identity than national identity. The local is more loved and more real for these students – thus, what is happening in the areas of London they know and inhabit is far more important than Britain at large or national identity. And belonging to Bermondsey by default thus means not belonging to Peckham, or New Cross or another area of London.

The discussion on Britishness will vary according to where you are in Britain and who you are interviewing in terms of their age, gender and cultural/religious background. In this paper, I have presented findings relating to two Year Eleven students in South East London who come to a discussion on Britishness with their personal perspectives. When I interview them about their views on the meaning of Britishness, there are recurring themes that occur in their discourse and thus have significance for our understanding of what Britishness means to these young people.

An important finding is that London and their identity as Londoners is significant, and a major part of being British. London comes first, and being Britain is almost secondary in terms of identity. The students tell us about the territorial nature of different parts of London and how this affects their experience of Britishness; moreover we learn of the alarming unsafe and seedy elements to the city – guns and gangs – which affect their day to day existence. The students discuss the 'racial' aspects of being British – and what this specifically means in their personal experience of Bermondsey. The

students show us that any discourse on Britishness will inevitably highlight the complex relationship between family/home and identity/belonging. Lastly, the students are extremely articulate in voicing the ever evolving nature of Britishness, as well as its intricate mingling with multiculturalism.

I am writing about Britishness in a particular place – which is always changing – in a particular cultural context – forever changing – a particular socio-political context – again changing; students' personalities and perspectives are changing as life goes on minute by minute, day by day, week by week and so on.

I am not claiming that this is the one way we should define Britishness – as again these perspectives offered to me by students in this one school are ever changing. However it is fascinating to understand some aspects of identity in our time by attempting to grasp some of the themes and patterns that are emerging in the students' discourse; perhaps this can be compared with policymakers' political discourse; whilst the government have this anti-terror rhetoric high on the agenda – such fears were not evident in what the students revealed in their personal discourse on Britishness.

Definitions of Britishness are fleeting and evolving as experiences mould us, as we encounter new events, ideas and people. There has been work in the past on what Britishness means to second-generation Pakistanis, this will soon be superseded by work on what Britishness mean to second-generation Polish youth. The second-generations will become third, fourth and fifth generations – and new research will cover these new identities in a new Britain.

End Notes

¹The student is making reference to the Channel Four reality show *Big Brother* which made famous Jade Goody who was from Bermondsey.